PASSPORT TO

ARISTASIA

In pursuit of his own Shangri-La, **Roy Turner** took afternoon tea with Aristasian Ambassadress Miss Marianne Martindale and learnt all about discipline, elegance and why she doesn't like The Beatles...

Have you ever dreamed of another, better world where everyone knows their place in the scheme of things and old fashioned feminine principles are rigorously applied? A place in this drab, grey man-made world where magic still weaves wondrous spells? Well, there is such a place and one doesn't need a magic carpet to guide one there. The enchanting all-female world of Aristasia lies not at the end of some fairy-tale rainbow. It's location is surprisingly earth-bound – the suburban fringes of London Transport's Central Line, to be exact.

From the outside, nothing about the house distinguished it from any of the others in this leafy, suburban street of quiet, select homes. The more observant passerby might notice that all the curtains are permanently drawn. But, apart from this petty quirk, one has no way of telling that one is standing at the borders of a very foreign country and that the curtains represent the battlements of a well-defended empire.

There are in all some five or six Aristasian households scattered around Britain. This is the embassy and the only one that may be visited, with an appointment, by an outsider. And Miss Martindale, as ambassadress and spokeswoman, is the only Aristasian who will communicate with the media. Even so, she will meet only on her terms. She expects and receives politeness at all times. Later, I was to learn from the lady herself the kind of treatment she meted out to the minions of TV host and legendary debunker of the rich and famous, Ruby Wax. Apparently, they were so eager for Miss Martindale to appear on the show, her henchperson showed up at the embassy armed with a bunch of flowers, a box of chocolates and a cheque for two thousand pounds. With a minimum of formality, Miss Martindale divested the poor fellow of both flowers and chocolates and promptly shut the door in his face. Obviously, Ms Wax wasn't polite enough.

Luckily, I fare a little better and am admitted by Miss Martindale herself. Ushered into the drawing room, I find myself in a world of by-gone charm and elegance. A world that resolutely refuses to acknowledge the march of time or the social decay outside in what they derisively call the Pit. Indeed, Aristasians ignore all events (even the calender itself) beyond 1960. There is no television here or any other evidence that the past thirty-five years ever happened. Music is strictly of the 78rpm variety and the required 'current' reading comprises backnumbers of Picture Post and Country Life delivered to themselves through the letterbox according to day and month, but never year. Here, the 1950's reign supreme. The 1920's and 30's are in favour too, although the 1940's are frowned upon and the Second World War simply never happened in Aristasia. Yet for those with sensitivity enough to see beyond what might easily be dismissed as just another example of quaint English eccentricity, there is something else at work here. Something strange, yet powerful and even magical.

Miss Martindale herself (first names are rarely permitted and an atmosphere of genteel formality is maintained at all times) dresses and acts completely in the Aristasian character she has created. Her clothes and make-up, right down to the stylish pink Jezebel cigarettes and holder reflect the poise and demeanour of another, more genteel, era. Her voice and manner is authoritative, yet brimming with vitality for the subject she so obviously adores and always, unfailingly, the quintessence of the femininity she so passionately promotes.

"I think it is quite interesting how we began," Miss Martindale relates with infectious enthusiasm, "because we started off as writers. A group of girls who always had discipline as a part of everyday life because the conception was related to it. Right from the start we rejected the Pit and the late 20th century and looked back to traditional philosophical ideas. This meant we were hierarchical. So there were always mistresses and school mistresses and there were always girls who were servants and schoolgirls. But we didn't begin writing about that. We began writing about other things. We then went on to write about what was our everyday reality for commercial reasons. But we wouldn't have anything other than all girls and we would only reflect what was our true reality; which was not about domination but about having genuine authority and looking after those below you in a genuine hierarchy. In those days we didn't know what we wrote would sell because we weren't going to be deliberately provocative or titillating. And we had no interest in addressing that market of dominant ladies and submissive men which was so much bigger. I must say, we were very pleasantly surprised to find that there was a market for the quality of our literature, which can't be beaten in any field, I would think.

"We are very serious about maintaining our integrity about what we're prepared to write about and how we're prepared to write it. And we would only write very high quality material. The first book, 'The Female Disciplinary Manual' was actually a collection of papers that circulated around different Aristasian households. They were collected together, edited and typewritten. Miss Snow's novel is a fictionalised version of our reality. The 'Manual' is fact. Everything in it has happened. For instance, describing what it's like to give a thousand lines. Someone, somewhere

Miss Martindale and Mr Turner discuss the downfall of western civilization and stuff... *Picture Stella*

down the line has been subjected to the various punishments described."

Aristasia first came into being at Lady Margarets College at Oxford University in the early 1970's. Miss Martindale herself joined a short time later. How did she become involved?

"It was like a little colony," She explains, "At the time I had absolutely no idea about corporal punishment. It was something that had never crossed my mind. Very soon after I joined someone saw that I had a 'schoolmistress' in me, so they just put me in charge of somebody else. I was told a little about it, but essentially I was just told to get on with it. I found that I was naturally strict and that I liked looking after people in that way. About a year after that I was given the position of being mistress of a household, so I had the dual responsibility of taking care of education where it arises – which isn't everyday, because there are so many other things one has to do – and looking after any household I happened to be in.

"The main motivation of everyone involved was disassociation from the Pit. But, as time went on, a small number of us who wanted to live completely privately, having found the maid who was going to be faithful or the companion who made a settled household took themselves off. It fragmented after Oxford years or perhaps dispersed would be a better word. We ourselves went to Ireland with quite a few of the girls and were there for sometime."

The 'Irish period' occurred during the 1980's (or the third decade of darkness according to the Aristasian timescale) and found the hardcore Aristasians setting up residence in a mansion in County Donegal. Their numbers ranged from five to 14 with Miss Martindale as headmistress. Things went well in their new-found home, which they dubbed St Brides, for about ten years. Then trouble loomed in the form of a maid who sued the headmistress for actual bodily harm. Although every girl who joined the school accepted the certainty of punishment, and bearing in mind the girl in question had consented to the cane, she won the case and Miss Martindale was found guilty of assault.

Miss Martindale sets the records straight, "I only disciplined her three times in around 18 months – and then only very faintly."

She is also keen to correct the implication in some press reports that Aristasia is in any way a 'secret' organisation to which there is no admittance.

"We were always interested in being available for any girl who wanted to escape from the dreariness of late 20th century life." She explains, "This house is the Embassy of Aristasia. If anyone comes here then they're entering another country. It's said at the beginning of *The Feminine Regime*: "Have you ever wanted to go through a wardrobe into Narnia or the Looking Glass in Alice?" And that's the absolute gospel truth. Because we distil and make manifest so strongly femininity and the feminine principle we really, truly are not living in the same place as you. And when somebody comes here, her whole experience of herself completely changes.

"I can give you an example. A girl came here recently dressed, as many girls in the Pit do, in a very masculine way. I felt, however, that she had a very feminine nature and a very soft side. She was interested and wanting to put her heart into it and join in when she was here. She wanted to be 'good', if you like. She asked me: "Should I wear a skirt when I come". And I said:" No, don't. You just live your life there. Come through the doorway into the embassy and be feminine here and have the two completely separate. So she came and I dressed her up as a schoolgirl. She and I were both expecting her 'schoolgirl' to come out, because no matter what the physical age a 'young' side to a girl's character invariably emerges. Incidentally, the girls you read about in the 'Manual' and our other books seem like schoolgirls, but they're all adult women feeling like a 'schoolgirl' inside.

"So I took her to a special room that's set aside for this sort of transformation where I put a uniform on her and a wig. It was very feminine wig. And a character came through that was very fussy, very 'hoity-toity'. You see what happens is a girl becomes something she could never be in the Pit. Something she doesn't realise or perhaps doesn't even have any inclination toward in the outside world. After we gave the girl's character an Aristasian name, *(note: in Aristasia 'masculine' names are exchanged for purely feminine ones. Thus, Jameson or 'son of James' would be substituted for 'daughter of..')* she said to me: "If I had to describe the sort of person I really hated, I'd have described that character". It wasn't that the character was feminine. It was a side she was denying. But more than that – and here it becomes very exciting – is that you get a whole sense of the character of the girl. Now I realised this girl was in the fifth year in our magical school, even though it was her first real visit. And I also sensed, because she happened to come along at about the same time as another girl she knew – that the other girl had a 'prefect' inside her. I could tell by her authority. And I knew the feminine one – the conceited one – wouldn't have anything to do with the girls in her year. She liked to befriend the

'In Aristasia we really, truly are not living in the same place as you'

bigger girls in the 6th form. And I knew she had a pony at home and all that sort of thing.

"So, you see, they come complete with a whole world. It's not just they're appearance; not just the fact that they can look in the mirror and say 'ah!' because their face changes so much. It's that you 'know' their whole history. You use that to make it come even stronger. Next time I know this girl is coming I'm going to take some of my own girls – they are passed around anyway – and I'm going to have the girls with a 'younger' personality, though they might all be the same age (20's or 30's) physically, dressed in gym slips and tunics. Then I'm going to have the prefects, and also the girl who is also a bit 'older', in skirts. I'll just let it come to life then! I'll be the schoolmistress, you know, teaching this and that. Then I'll go out of the room and leave the prefects in charge. In the school you turn a bit of a blind eye to what the prefects get up to. If the mistresses' are away and they want to give someone a smack for something, they do. There is that element of a little bit of bullying or pinching and so on. It's all part of what is acceptable. Because each girl has a natural 'real life' school persona, it doesn't need any play acting. They just come to life on their own. And then we just see what happens. You simply enter into it and it unfolds. I don't even know what sort of schoolmistress is going to come. Different schoolmistresses' come through me. I might go in as a young, glamourous schoolmistress or I might be a very strict schoolmistress who is nearer my physical age. I might go in as someone who is quite tolerant and kind and not terribly strict or I might appear as a terrifying harridan. That's all part of the magic. I wouldn't even know myself."

"It sounds like a continual, on-going process of exploration" I commented.

"Oh, yes. Very much." Miss Martindale agreed enthusiastically," You create this wonderfully intense magical thing between the different girls and, when they're out of uniform, then something completely different would happen. For instance, someone who perhaps was a maid in one situation might, in another situation, be something quite different. Though they do tend to be predominantly maids because it's in their characters to serve, even a maid can have an adolescent girl inside her who's on a peer level with other girls in that her personality is of a similar age. She might have a more powerful side which is a bit more grown up – say twenty or something – who can go to the night club we have created within Aristasia. We obviously don't go into the Pit. She might be allowed to be one of the girls at the club, a waitress or some such."

"You say you create the night club right here in this house?"

"Oh, yes. We create restaurants, rock n' roll cafeterias... what else? Cinemas. We create a whole world of entertainment. We actually leave the house by one door and come in another into a room which doesn't look the same as it did when it was just a drawing room or just a dining room. We'll change it around and it creates a very strong atmosphere. Though the schoolroom tends to stay as the schoolroom."

Miss Martindale at her blackboard; note use of Aristasian names. ***Picture Stella***

"How long do your girls usually tend to stay here? Is it a few hours or a few days...?"

"It can vary between coming for one or two evenings a week or a couple of days every few months if they live a long way away. At times we have girls living with us and at times we have girls 'almost' living with us depending on peoples circumstances and so on. There's a lot of flexibility there as to what's appropriate for someone's life. Obviously, a lot of girls would have commitments such as earning a living which meant their time here was limited. But you just make sure that someone enters into it fully and is completely in Aristasia and being feminine while she's actually here."

"What would you do if a TV tried to gain admittance to Aristasia?"

"Well, that's just forbidden." Miss Martindale answered firmly. "This is very much a thing for genuine girls, as it were. That's a different thing altogether. I think the strength of that interest, or whatever it is you'd call it, is because of the dress of femininity in women. I feel it's like a reaction to recognising that femininity has almost entirely been pushed out of the Pit, and it creates a sort of longing for femininity which is then transposed in the individual thinking that it's inside him. When I feel it's just a reaction to the drab, dreary masculine world that surrounds everybody in the Pit."

"As I listen to you speak about Aristasia, I can't help but think of connections here between Christianity versus pre-Christian paganism. The Sky Father versus the Earth Mother. Do you accept a similarity in your philosophies?"

"Yes, Christianity is rather a masculine religion, I agree there. But the Earth Mother I see as a rather degenerate form of paganism, really. That's a rather late thing. We very much adhere to tradition and, fortunately, traditional principles exist in Plato and people like that where you can learn about ancient things. Incidentally, the 'Arist' in Aristasia comes from Aristotle. But I wouldn't call us pagan, though it is very much connected to matriarchal things such as the hearth and the home which is the centre of feminine power, if you like. And that's been denigrated and denied by women and by men in the closing years of the 20th century. Everything now takes place in a public world. There's no value in the private world; it's not seen as having any value.

"Part of what we're creating is drawing on the power and beauty that can spring to life in the sanctuary of the home. The discipline is integral to it in ways that I probably don't even understand myself. The exercise of a genuine hierarchy and the instilling of obedience into those below you. I think of myself as serving a heavenly power and serving God. And I think of myself as serving everyone I rule. That's the difference when some-

one has genuine authority. This is a whole world. Even though I may rule only one household within it. I'm looking after everyone I have power over. I don't have any interest in personal power. That's why I don't think of myself as a dominatrix."

In fact, as will be revealed, The Aristasians have no connection or interest in the 'conventional' world of fetishism at all, referring to its practitioners dismissively as 'Silly Monkeys'. Take the initials and you'll get the joke.

"I train a maid to lay the table almost as though it's a dance. Not just to lay everything in its set place through convention, but to sense the harmony. And, as a mistress, you try to be the perfect mistress, to fulfill an archetype rather than a stereotype. It's taken me twenty years to find what would look from the outside like a dominating personality because I was so determined that I wasn't going to rule simply from my own whims. I now have a number of personalities that actually enjoy the power and enjoy punishing. But that's after twenty years of being strict with people purely out of duty and not having a sense of power. It's only been given to me, as it were, when I have so completely subjugated myself to the idea of looking after and serving people below me. It's a state of being free, or as far as a human being can be free, of personal willfulness, if you like. And I admit it! I like 'enjoying' being strict and not just doing it out of duty!

"In a traditional hierarchy everyone serves other people, not just the servants. The servant serves in a personal bond because they have a character that needs the intimate personal service. Somebody who farms the land or carves chairs serves in a material way, while someone with authority serves by protecting and ruling. In a genuine traditional society such as Hinduism then you have at the top people who are scholars and priest's and priestesses who serve by that function. So, you see, a hierarchy is very, very interesting. And not a bit like the late 20th century thinks of it."

"Yes," I interjected, starting to fall under the spell of this enigmatic lady, "I understand exactly what you're saying."

"I know you do," Miss Martindale smiled benignly, "I can feel it. I can feel you understand everything I'm saying. It's very interesting like that because when you think in a traditional way then everyone is giving to everybody else as well as being busy ordering them all about."

"In Olde English the traditional name for the king or chieftain was the 'bread-giver' in the sense that he was, as you've been saying, the servant of all. When Anglo Saxons referred to King Alfred burning the cakes, it was in an allegorical sense. It meant that he had lost his ability to rule."

"Oh, I didn't know that." My hostess exclaimed, "How interesting. And it's more like that than people realise. Somebody looks at a person who has a lot of power and has girls doing things for her and so on, and it looks as if one is leading an easy life. But, as anyone who has had responsibility knows, being in charge of people means that you don't have five minutes to yourself except when you're unconscious asleep. When you're looking after people you're actually at the beck and call of anyone who needs you. You've always got responsibilities. You're never an individual when you've got an important function like that. You might have the odd moment when you feel like an individual, but you're on duty 24 hours a day, really. I feel this is a vocation and that's true of other girl's in Aristasia as well, whether they be maids or commanding maids. I have extra responsibilities because of taking in new girls and helping them to understand things.

"It's quite clearly in one's experience of it and intellectual background Aristasia really is a completely separate world and a completely separate country from the Pit. Anyone who visits Aristasia has to leave something behind and step into something else and you have to understand different things from what you're used to.

"But maybe we shouldn't talk too much about Aristasia." Miss Martindale broke off into a girlish laugh, "We do want to sell the books!"

Fuelled with more coffee, we turned the conversation to Aristasia's blossoming publishing empire. As I listened, I leafed through the volumes available and found myself impressed by the quality of the production; Beautifully bound, gilt embossed hardbacks. The kind of books one might have purchased forty years ago. But, then again, what else would one expect in Aristasia?

"Let me just tell you a bit about the next novel Miss Snow is writing. It's called *Children of the Void*. Her previous book, *The Feminine Regime*, is a really good yarn and, while it reflects our reality – especially the first few chapters – nothing like that happened in real life. Nevertheless, it demonstrates things about the use of discipline and so on. But it's not actually linked with our real life. However, *Children of the Void* is. It's about our actual life and how punishments occur within it and how a girl might be sent under punitive service; in other words, being a maid under very, very strict control. And it's all absolutely true! It won't read as if it is, though, because no one will be able to believe it! But every word of it is true to life – our life. That's all I want to say on the subject."

"Concerning the Aristasian hierarchy." I venture tentatively, "May I ask where you are placed personally? Are there girls above you?"

"There are girls above me, certainly, but they are in closed communities and not under constant supervision in the way anyone under me is. I will get seen and visited from time to time. Now, if I've done anything wrong I won't be punished for it as me. I'd be punished as my 'schoolgirl'."

"So in being house mistress you're not denying your own schoolgirl persona in all this?"

"Oh no. Not at all!" Miss Martindale stressed, "For instance, when I see the girls this week, as I was describing to you, when we go out of school we're going to an ice cream soda bar. I'll be going as a sixth former because I've got that sort of character in me." She breaks into an endearingly schoolgirlish laugh, "Obviously, I don't want to miss out on everything by going somewhere like that as a schoolmistress or mistress of the house! That's one of the nice things about it. I'll still be the eldest 'schoolgirl' and I'll still be in charge of everyone. But, if I've somehow failed in my duty or something like that, and it's seen as necessary to deal with me, then I'll be sat at a schooldesk myself. I've never given a punishment I haven't experienced."

"Part of what we're doing in Aristasia is giving girls a place in a hierarchy and a place in our hearts as well. Those things that are lost in the Pit. Being able to trust and being able to love without being rejected. Anyone who enters deeply into Aristasia finds that they can trust it will be forever. If the girl decides – as has happened at various times – that she wants to go back to the Pit, then she does so and that's that. But if she doesn't, then she knows it will be for always and that's an important contrast when everything is so impermanent and fragmented in the Pit."

"So how is that created?"

"Well," Miss Martindale continues in the assured, well modulated tones of someone who understands exactly what she's talking about, "it's partly created through love and affection and the fact you're given so much time and so on. But it's also created through discipline and the bond that's created through trusting the person who's disciplining you. It creates a sort of magical connection. Nearly all the girls who come to us feel very strongly how drab everything is in the Pit. They discover in Aristasia a whole world that deals with everything from traditional philosophy to how you ought to do your eyes. It covers so much it's often difficult to know what to focus on in an interview. And it's all very fascinating. But, fundamentally, it is a hierarchy; it is about genuine discipline, not 'dominating'. Mainstream journalists do tend to get very interested in the picturesque side of what we're doing, so we do tend to end up as these funny little people doing something odd. And we are doing much, much more.

"Another thing that doesn't often come across in articles about us is that we do encour-

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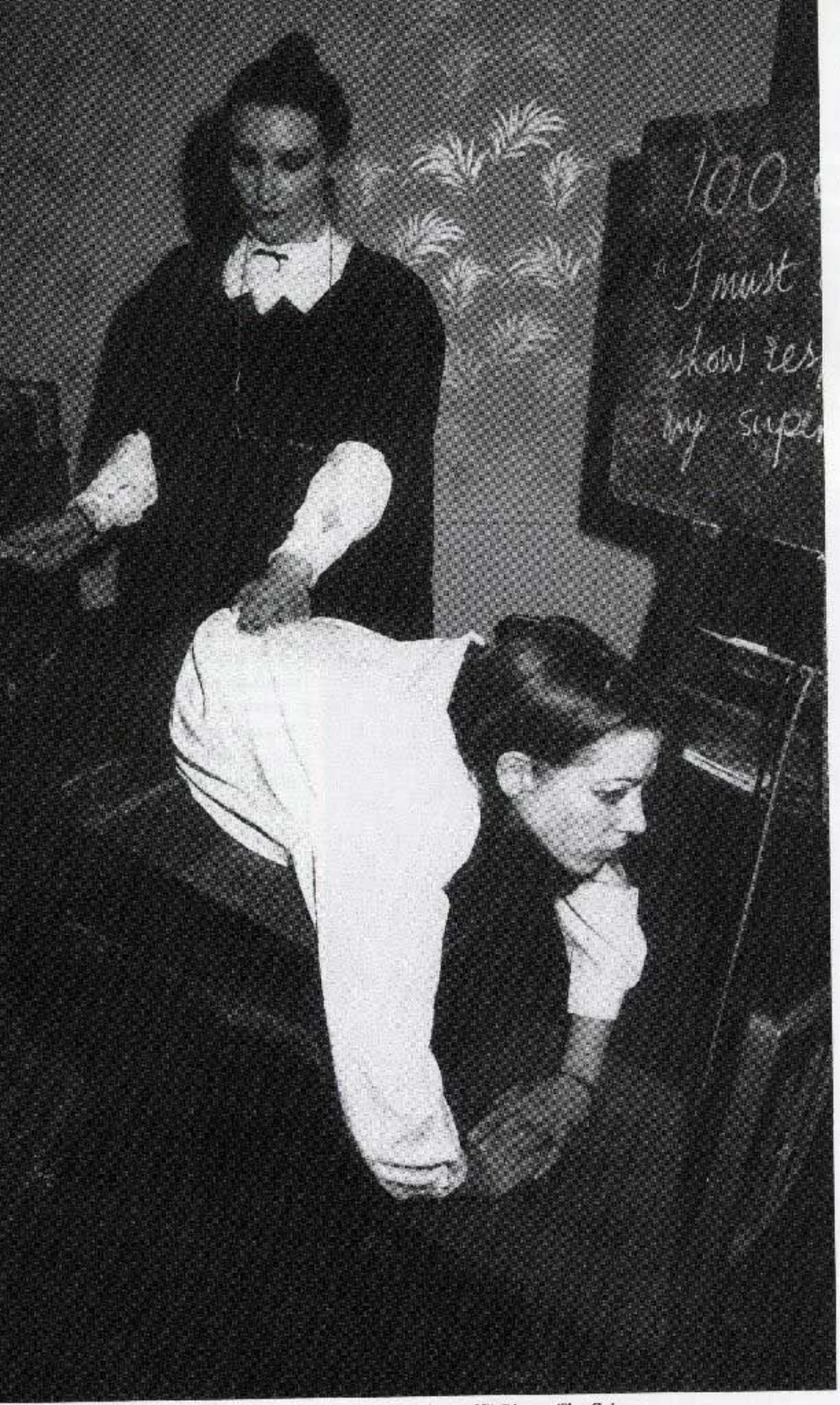
'Part of what we're doing is giving girls a place in a hierachy'



"I've never given a punishment I've not experienced myself", *Picture Tim Colman*

age females (and females only) to visit. Any girl who feels she would benefit from what Aristasia has to offer is very welcome. A girl who comes along for a chat will find us very approachable."

"Are all girls suitable?"

Sometimes a girl is 'glued' into the Pit, and by that I mean so strongly adhering to television values and attitudes and immorality and all the rest of it. In such a case I would tell her that I didn't think she was quite ready. But if I sense something in her that could be brought to life, I'll invite her to come back. Say somebody came along from the 'Silly Monkey' club and said: "I like what you're doing, but for me discipline definitely has to be sexual." Then I'd tell them there's no point coming because, although our world is sensual, it's subtle. It's like the sort of atmosphere you get from our writing. It's intelligent, refined and very powerful because it's controlled."

"So what is this subtle difference between sensuality and sexuality?", I asked.

"I don't think there's any point in pretending that administering and receiving discipline doesn't arouse certain feelings, but it depends what you do with them. One can indulge them and give rein to what I call the 'lower passions' and be 'fleshy' about it or you can refine it. We are absolutely chaste in Aristasia. It's all girls, as you know, and there is a sort of subtle sensuality, but it is chaste. Now that might sound boring, but it's actually very fulfilling. It reminds me what Oscar Wilde said about smoking. He said: 'Smoking is the perfect

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type of the perfect pleasure'. It's exquisite but it leaves you unsatisfied. I think that's a very feminine mentality. The masculine mentality demands that you have to go to the end, to a certain goal. You have to make it explicit, you have to indulge 'fleshily', as it were. Where as everything we do is raised to higher things. So you can get very intense atmospheres, but they don't fall into lower behavior at all. It just makes more magic."

"Can I pick up on that word 'magic' which seems to me to be very central to what we're talking about here. The things you are doing here in Aristasia remind me very much of what wiccan magicians might call 'sex magic', a raising of energy."

"Well, I would say it was spiritual, very spiritual, because you have an inward submission to God. There have been times when I have really felt that, and when I've prayed to do God's will – who I conceive in a feminine form – I've prayed to submit to something and wanted Her will to be done, not my own, and I've experienced intense ecstatic feelings just relinquishing my will. And I think that, whether you administer or receive discipline or whether you do both (which in a hierarchy you find some people who do both, obviously), the true heart of discipline, the key to it, is the submission to a higher authority. It's this submission that gives the delightful feeling, shall we say. Not the physical aspect of it, but the spiritual submission.

"Physical discipline purifies, cleanses and encloses. It raises the soul higher. The sensuality you get from giving a punishment is because you're submitting yourself to something that knows better than you what's appropriate. There was once a girl who'd been really, very naughty and I gave her six strokes harder than I've ever managed before. Something higher than me had decided it had to be a very severe punishment. I don't know if you're aware of this, but it's thought that in Ancient Greece flagellation was practiced as a part of a young persons rite of passage."

"Yes, it was the Spartans. In fact, someone wrote an article on that very subject in a past issue of Domina."

"Really? That's interesting. Well, it proves the point. I'll have to read that one."

"Why did you choose the name Wildfire Club?" I asked, "It sounds far too masculine and aggressive for Aristasia. A bit like Hellfire Club."

"I think it was simply because we felt what we were doing was exciting. And we did think about the Hellfire Club. Then someone said, "It'll spread like wildfire." We liked that."

"How much contact do you have with the outside world?"

"Hardly any." Miss Martindale admitted with a sense of achievement, "Some of us do live what we call 'up to date', which we would call not later than the 1960's."

"I thought that was your car outside – which looks very modern."

"Oh no, that's not mine." She retorted somewhat indignantly at the mere suggestion, "I've got a Wolsey 1660 and one of the girls has an old Austin. They're very good and reliable. We'll go out in the car and we'll play dance band music, jazz and rock n' roll and you're in your own world the whole time. You take your own world with